

component ordering by Internet

towards the digital Edgware Road?

Relative newcomers to the noble art of electronics may find it hard to believe that it was once possible to obtain a wide range of electronic parts from a local shop. Alas, the inroads mail order business have made into the electronic component trade have caused the virtual disappearance of whole clusters of small but well-stocked electronics shops from the high-street. Where once there were countless electronic component suppliers along London's Edgware Road, the diversity is gone for good. Today there are only half a dozen or so 'broad-range' suppliers left, while much smaller specialist suppliers successfully serve the remaining niche markets. Recently, all and sundry in the mail order business have discovered the Internet to sell components and take orders.

In hobby as well as professional electronics, it is hard to imagine a situation without mail order companies. By contrast, local shops are having an increasingly difficult time to offer the customer an ever expanding range of components. Although many hobbyists and professionals will be familiar with the huge catalogues published by Farnell and RS Components (to mention but a few), it is increasingly noticed that the available component range, huge as it may be, does not include that one special component you may be looking for to complete your project. That is not to say that the

catalogues are useless, on the contrary, as most of you will agree they often contain a staggering amount of worthwhile information. The point is that the product range is too broad to allow space for special components.

Elektor Electronics construction projects, too, often contain special components that are not easily found in mail-order catalogues. Fortunately, that specific market niche is aptly addressed by kit suppliers like Viewcom (the UK outlet of Stippler Elektronik) and C-I Electronics who advertise in this magazine are able to obtain reasonable stocks of such parts for our readers.

PAN-EUROPEAN ASPIRATIONS

A number of big component suppliers like Farnell, RS Components (Electro-mail) and, recently, Conrad Electronics, have gone *pan-European* and claim to be able to supply any item from their product range to anyone in any EEC country. Others like Maplin stick to the UK market only (although expansions have been announced). A general trend, however, is that the mail-order giants in true market-oriented fashion enable customers to place orders via email or the Internet. Although this article is by no means intended as a comprehensive market survey, we have gathered some information that may be useful to our readers when it comes to ordering parts 'digitally'. Because of space constrictions for this article the information has been kept concise, and readers are encouraged to contact the companies listed for further information. This may include enquiring about minimum order value or quantity, an overview of the product range (for example, as a downloadable file, or on a floppy disk), delivery options, the availability of a technical hotline, a printed catalogue or a CD-ROM. Because many of our readers live overseas, special attention should be given to customs procedures and postage and packing (P&P) charges.

PITFALLS

Not so long ago, the main problem encountered in obtaining parts from mail-order companies was not the actual process of placing an order, but the minimum order quantities some suppliers seemed to insist on. At some point, this made it totally impossible for hobbyists (and repair technicians!) to obtain 'one-offs' of essential parts like

semiconductors, electromechanical parts and 'passives'. Although most suppliers have dropped this very undesirable requirement, there is still a snag: a surcharge for small quantities!

The RS Components web site and its component ordering features are pretty extensive. Our advertiser Electromail is the retail branch of RS Components — its component range is available on CD-ROM. The website shown here may be found at <http://rswww.com>

ENTER EMAIL AND THE INTERNET

The arrival of the Internet and in particular electronic mail (email) has given electronic product suppliers and their customers unprecedented opportunities to get in touch and do business. Today, it is possible to browse catalogues over the Net, place orders and simply wait for the postman or courier to deliver the goods. There are, of

Although the appearance of the website run by Leeds-based Farnell Components is fairly Spartan, the product range is overwhelming and the ordering facilities set an example to the competition. Have a look at www.farnell.com

course negative sides to this development, including minimum order quantities or values;

- 'hidden' charges;
- anonymity (i.e., the lack of personal contact and advice);
- the inability to actually see a component before buying;
- being unable to browse around in a real shop

Although the traditional means of communicating an order to a component supplier are still very much in use (telephone, fax and letter), nearly all suppliers of components, tools, software, ready-made products and even surplus goods can now be reached by email. In some cases, wonderfully designed websites allow the customer to 'shop around', fill a virtual shopping cart with goods and 'check out' by credit card payment.

Remarkably, order turnaround

Welcome to rswww.com - the RS Catalogue, Data Library and secure ordering on-line - Microsoft Internet Explorer

File Edit View Go Favorites Help

Back Forward Stop Refresh Home Search Favorites History Channels Fullscreen Mail Print Edit

Address <http://rswww.com/cgi-bin/ecom>

Home Find Products Orders Data Library Open Account Update My Details Help

Current Order Form

- Stock numbers and quantities can be entered directly into this form
- When all entries are complete, click on the 'Update Order Total' button

Current Order Form Saved Orders Order History

add 1 row Add

RS Stock Nos.	Qty.	Description [view product]	Units	Unit Price	Goods Value	Remove Product	Messages
				£ 0.000	£ 0.00	X	

Update Order Total Running Total £ 0.00

Clear Order Form Save Order

Note: Your order has not been placed yet
Proceed With Order, Delivery Information >>

© RS Components Ltd

Current Order - Microsoft Internet Explorer

File Edit View Go Favorites Help

Back Forward Stop Refresh Home Search Favorites History Channels Fullscreen Mail Print Edit

Address <https://www.farnell.com/cgi-bin/fecshop.cgi>

Farnell

Order Form

Farnell Order Code	Description	Unit Price	Qty Ordered	Item Total
** VAT Items **				
234576	TRANSISTOR, MOSFET	£ 0.3370	15	£ 5.0550
Sub Total:				£ 5.0550

VAT and Delivery charges where appropriate will be added when you place your order

Tips

To increase or decrease the quantity of a product you have ordered:

Done Internet zone

main frame - Microsoft Internet Explorer

File Edit View Go Favorites Help

MAPLIN ELECTRONICS

Stores Promotions About Us Support Vacancies

Telephone Sales 01702 554000

Interactive On-Line Catalogue NOW LIVE

Shopping Promotions

Best Viewed with current versions

Microsoft Internet Explorer

Now! Netscape

NEW

electronics & beyond

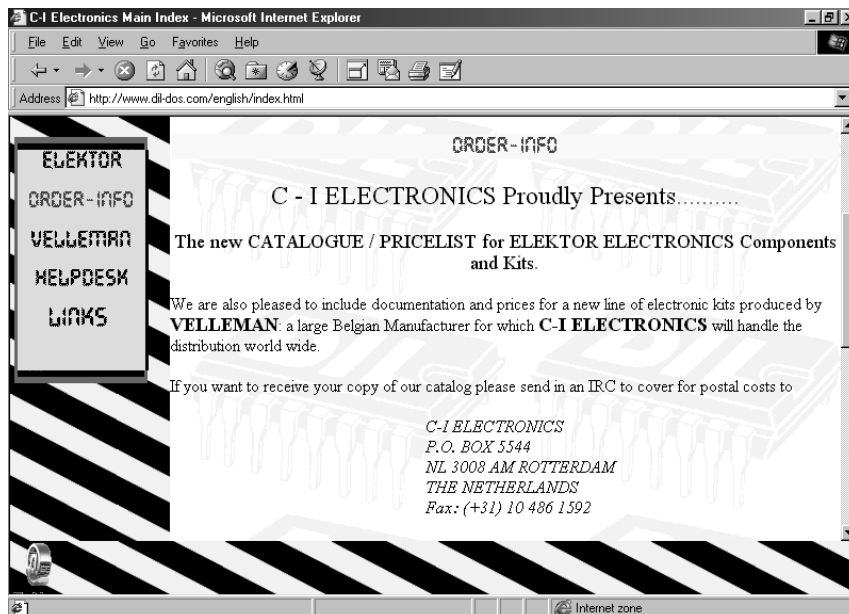
On-Line Shopping via our Fully Interactive catalogue

- full product descriptions
- secure ordering
- on-line stock checking

"Following the introduction of our Interactive Online catalogue we have experienced unprecedented demand which at times has caused unacceptable system difficulties. We have also received many valuable email communications from our customers and have taken the

Internet zone

Unfortunately the web site run by Maplin at www.maplin.co.uk was being 'refurbished' at the time of writing this article. Maplin's continued support of the UK electronics hobbyist is still exemplary, witness the Maplin catalogue and the opening of retail stores throughout the country.



times have not greatly diminished since the arrival of email. UK mainland delivery within 24 or 48 hours can usu-

If you are looking for a kit to build an Elektor Electronics project then a visit to the C-I Electronics web site may be worth your while. This Rotterdam-based mail-order specialist also stocks a vast range of special components. Their web site is found at www.dil-dos.com

ally be guaranteed however, with faster options available at extra cost to the customer.

NOT FOR ONE-OFFS...

Just as we find an ever smaller number of traders taking orders from private customers, so the number of broadband suppliers to the industry has dwindled to half a dozen or so over the past 10 years. A long series of company mergers have resulted in just a few players

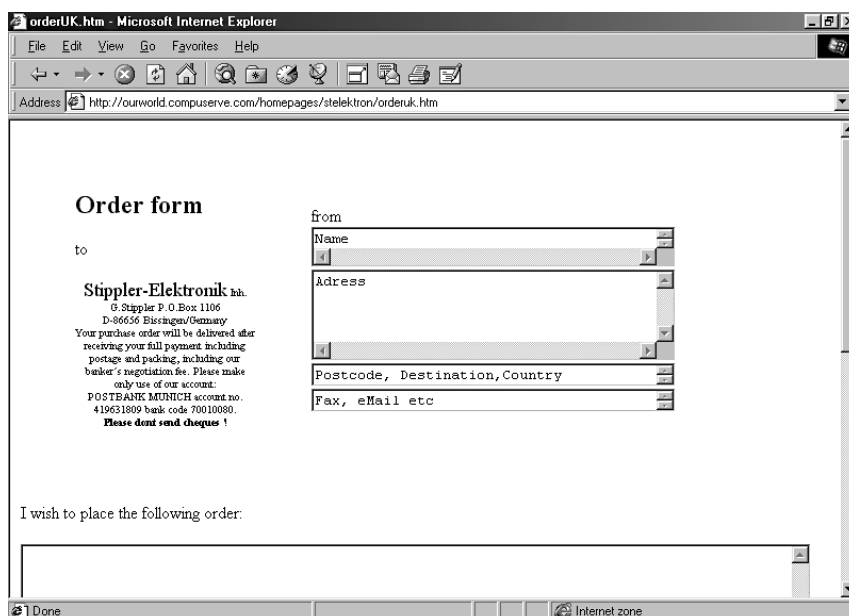
Conrad Electronic, originally active on the Germany market only, gives evidence of their pan-European aspirations by running an English-language website with full on-line ordering facilities. The website is at www.conrad-electronic.com.



left in this field. Although two of these, Farnell and RS Components, have already been mentioned, it should be noted that they do, in principle, supply to individual customers (Farnell, directly, while RS Components employs its 'Electromail' retail branch for this purpose).

Two competitors in the pan-European field, Spoerle (www.spoerle.com) and Eurodis (www.eurodis.com), should be mentioned here. Although neither has an on-line ordering system up and running using a 'shopping basket' function or similar, you should at least know their names because they are two of the main wholesale suppliers to the retail trade when it comes to special parts used in Elektor Electronics projects. The UK branch of Eurodis is Bolton-based HB Electronics. So, if your local retailer can't supply it, tell him to try Spoerle or Eurodis.

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In the UK, the kits and special components stocked by our advertiser Stippler Elektronik are available through Viewcom Electronics. The website to visit is <http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/stelektron>